

**Engaging Adult Learners in the Writing/ESL Classroom***by Katerina Baitinger, Ph.D.*

Many students today assume that it is the teacher's job to educate them, tell them what they need to know or give them the answers. Moreover, because they have been taught to be passive learners, they think that their job is to listen without resistance and to try to learn as best as they can, and, in some cases, verbatim what they are taught. Many students, in fact, accept everything they read as factual information. That is to say, even when they are sure authors stereotype or make sweeping generalizations, they are reluctant to question those whom they consider authorities. Lack of confidence clearly contributes to the way students absorb information, but fear of being embarrassed and perhaps even humiliated in front of their peers can also be an unrelenting factor. Most students are not able to recognize, embrace, and share their life experiences and knowledge they acquire as they grow. However, as educators, we must find creative ways to engage our students and to encourage them to actively participate in their own learning. Yet the application of such ideas has been elusive.

In many cases, in higher education today, we usually deal with two types of students. These are the pre-adults or those we call traditional students, and the adults, or those we call non-traditional students. In following Malcolm Knowles's (1991) "Andragogy" model, the primary role of pre-adults (children and adolescents including high school graduates) is to be full-time learners. For them "education is the primary or social role" (Knowles, 1991). In other words, the roles they play as students, children, and siblings do not include positions of power. Adult students, on the other hand, have either never initiated or completed their education. In some cases, many of them have interrupted their education. This, however, is crucial, for it enables them to take part in other social activities, or take on other social roles (Krajnc, 1989). What distinguishes adult roles is that the participants are focused upon living life, while pre-adults study about it. That is to say, when it comes to classroom instruction, adult learners do not have to be there: if the class is unpleasant, they can simply stop coming. As a result, when teaching adults, the customer (learner), not the subject, comes first and is always right (Rogers, 1989). In order to accommodate adult learners, we must shift our teaching paradigm to include techniques, styles, and even accepted learning theories that are not teacher-centered, but rather learner-centered. In fact, learning research clearly indicates that learner-centered instruction is the most effective way to teach adults, and ought to be applied across to all levels of education.

Knowles's adult education andragogical model presupposes:

1. Adults tend to be self-directing.
2. Adults have a rich reservoir of experience that can serve as a resource for learning.
3. Adults tend to have a life-, task-, or problem-centered orientation to learning as opposed to a subject-matter orientation, since their readiness to learn is frequently affected by their need to know or do something.
4. Adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal or intrinsic factors (such as helping their children with homework) as opposed to external or extrinsic forces (such as a raise in salary) (Knowles, 1980)

Based on the andragogical model, Knowles (1980) constructed a collaborative teaching paradigm that involves learners as partners. It is true that today's adult-learners' readiness to learn is frequently affected by their need to know or do something and by their need for advancement in the work place. As a result, they tend to have a life-, task-, or problem-centered orientation to learning as well as subject matter orientation. That is to say, adults today are motivated to learn due to internal and external factors, such as helping their children with homework, but also a raise in salary or retraining in a technologically advanced occupation.

A great way to reach a high level of positive interaction between teacher and learner, a type of partnership, may be established through initial classroom set up. For example, it is good practice to begin the first session by drafting the course content of your syllabus through teacher-learner negotiation. Even if the first session is devoted to needs assessment and discussing learner expectations for the course, it is crucial to provide as much written information about the course as possible, with a promise of a complete syllabus at the next session (Imel, 1994). Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate group work in the classroom format, simply because adult learners don't have much time to participate in the traditional learning environment. As a result, group work may develop positive peer relationships among learners, which in many cases are more important and have a much greater influence on learning than teacher-learner relationships (Imel, 1994). It is also important to break the traditional classroom model. Whenever possible, it helps to have class outdoors, to allow snacks during a class break, particularly in an early morning or late evening class. It is good practice, for example, to bring a basket with breakfast items or late snack items, together with a pot of coffee or hot chocolate. It is also important to encourage adult learners to take turns with the basket. This will do more than create opportunities for interaction; it will break down barriers between teacher and learners. Also, wherever possible use humor. It is through the use of humor that learners can see the "human" side of the teacher. For example, by laughing at their own mistakes, teachers can help learners understand that errors are a normal part of the learning process (Imel, 1994). There are other things that can be done to involve adult learners and steer them into sharing responsibility for their learning. You may, for example, encourage the formation of study groups and always be available for

individual teacher-learner conferences. Certainly, and it goes without saying, it is very important to provide an equitable learning environment for adult learners.

When it comes to writing capabilities become more complicated as "many adult learners believe that their writing skills are not adequate" (Fagan, 1988; Gambrell & Heatherington, 1981; Smith-Burke, 1987). For adult learners, making writing mistakes of any kind is a source of anxiety and confusion, and often contributes to their inability to open up not only to writing instruction, but also to learning in general. The learning environment should be of primary concern. An effective adult learning environment should meet both physical and psychological needs of adult learners. Furthermore, it should make them feel both safe and challenged through a partnership between learners and teacher. An ideal adult learning climate has a non-threatening, non-judgmental atmosphere in which adults have permission for and are expected to share in the responsibility for their learning (Rogers, 1989). As a result, it is important to put in place a number of practical steps to alleviate some anxiety and confusion, build self-esteem, and create a positive classroom environment in which students may grow and bloom into critical thinkers and skilled writers. To be sure, this practical application is not limited to the writing classroom. In fact, it can be extended to the rest of the general education curriculum, and perhaps even beyond.

Consequently, there are certain issues that inevitably come up again and again, within the language instruction curriculum. First of all, there is something to be said about composition theory and the importance and necessity of current theoretical knowledge for writing/language teachers. That is to say, current composition theory applications are of essence and should be a top priority in the classroom. Moreover, creativity must be considered as important as mechanics. That is to say, we must do away with outdated purist notions of language corruption. It is pertinent that writing teachers approach language as a living, breathing, evolving thing, and not as a stale, musty collection of rules and regulations that must be taught in the strictest sense. That is to say, we must follow a holistic approach to the teaching of writing. In other words, we must accept that writing is thinking, and good writing is the result of good thinking, that writing is action, and that words change people's thoughts and opinions. Writing, therefore, can be evaluated by its effects on readers. Finally, writing is communication: that is, readers must be willing and able to understand the writing in order to be influenced by it.

There are certain steps that teachers may take to aid in creating life-long learners through the use of writing.

### **The First Step: Easing Anxiety**

This is no easy task! In the majority of colleges and universities today, we encounter a variety of learners with numerous problems, difficulties, levels of abilities and learning or physical disabilities that

must be addressed. One of the problems non-traditional adult learners must face is fear of failure; another may be their struggle for perfection. As a result, many of our non-traditional adult learners are loaded with anxiety.

Certainly, in a writing class, this anxiety increases because of the various writing assignments learners are required to produce. Non-traditional journal writing may alleviate some of that anxiety. Since journal writing is not as formal as essay writing, adult learners are only required to produce writing based on their opinions, experiences, and acquired knowledge. Hence, journal writing is a great place to begin. In addition, informal writing, such as storytelling may further lessen some of that initial anxiety. For example, questions relating to stories about students' births, their children's births, or other family members' births may be used to break the ice. Questions relating to their growing up, such as happy or sad childhood memories may contribute to good journal writing habits as well. Additionally, questions about their cultural traditions and family stories, or what they remember best from growing up may be a good choice. Even those learners who have had very sad lives find something nice, happy, or unforgettable to say about growing up. The objective of this type of writing is to prompt learners to develop the confidence they need to take a proactive role when it comes to their studies and hopefully their own lives. Giving mini-lessons about a particularly difficult grammar point ought to decrease any additional anxiety. Journal entries may include free writing, writing extended narratives, dialogue, and double entry journals. The cyclical process of composing extended narratives involves generating ideas through free writing and brainstorming, drafting, conferencing with peers and teacher, revising organization and content, editing for form, and, in some cases, publishing writing for a broader audience. In dialogue journals, on the other hand, learners write about thoughts, experiences, reactions to texts, or issues of importance to them, and teachers respond to the content of learners' entries by sharing experiences, ideas, and reactions as well as modeling correct usage (Peyton & Staton, 1993). Students may also use the double entry journal which is a useful tool, not only in general education courses, but also in many specialized fields of study: each of the two facing pages is targeted for a specific task. The left page is used for notes, assigned readings, direct quotations, observations, lists, images, models, description of events, or summaries; the right page is used to record reflections about the material generated on the left page, such as comments, reactions, objections, feelings, questions, and new learning (Hughes, 1997).

There is another hurdle teachers and students must overcome: that is the anxiety over spelling. Some students believe that they are terrible writers because they can't spell. Allowing students to use a dictionary in the classroom alleviates that problem. In addition, the Internet may be utilized in the writing classroom. Terminology, definitions, interactive exercises and quizzes are some of the items that can be located on the World Wide Web. Even those classrooms that are not Internet ready may benefit, for it is quite easy to print

some of the quizzes and exercises available and assign them as homework. Likewise, thematic readings motivate adult learners to approach culture-specific writing, as well as more traditional essays, with ease. At the same time, they are encouraged to develop an interest in other cultures and traditions, develop a global perspective and are able to make the transition from journal writing to formal essay writing with ease.

### **The Second Step: Reading and Writing in Context**

Reading and writing are rudimentary yet interdependent disciplines. Furthermore, reading and writing in the disciplines is shaped by the unique conceptual, textual, and semantic demands of each area. For example, in the social sciences, in courses such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology, learners are asked to think critically. As a result, they are introduced to "sociocultural and critical perspectives" (O'Brien, Moje & Stewart, 1995). When it comes to adult learners, cultural studies perspectives must be included in interdisciplinary programs. It seems that adult learners perform at their best when they are able to study people's every day lives in a cultural context. That is to say, through their studies adult learners are able to make positive change in their own lives. Moreover, engaging learners in a greater variety of experiences, through reading and writing instruction, leads to a higher level of critical thinking than when either is taught alone. Adult learners become better thinkers if taught in classrooms where meaning is actively constructed through reading and writing. As a consequence, when teachers weave integrated reading and writing activities into interdisciplinary studies, they help learners become better readers, writers, and critical thinkers (Sweet, 1994).

One of the things that usually helps while teaching reading and writing is to do away with the traditional lecture format, which fosters passive rather than active learning (Roskos & Walker, 1994). Recent research has shown that by

1. including small- and whole-group discussions,
2. incorporating lively content-heavy presentations (including various media resources),
3. providing real life applied demonstrations, and
4. furnishing ample opportunities for critique, active engagement of adult learners is promoted, for content is very important to their learning abilities and styles (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987; Kennedy, 1987; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985).

Teachers must not overlook any opportunities for collaboration, discussion, and dialogue with adult learners. One of the ways such levels of learning and cooperation may be achieved is by training faculty to recognize the differences in learning styles (McNeely & Mertz, 1990). Clearly, students today, have a wide range of intellectual abilities and competences that cannot be measured or quantified on any standardized test. In fact, Howard Gardner (2003), a Psychologist,

and co-director of Harvard University's "Project Zero," the mission of which is to "understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity in the arts, as well as humanistic and scientific disciplines, at the individual and institutional levels" (Gardner, 2003), through extensive research on human intelligence, discovered that human beings have what he calls, "Multiple Intelligence." He clearly documents eight multiple intelligences which learners utilize to gain knowledge.

Verbal/Linguistic	makes use of the spoken and written word
Logical/Mathematical	makes use of numbers, calculations, logic, classifications, and critical thinking
Spatial	makes use of visual aids, visualization, color, art, and metaphor
Bodily/Kinesthetic	makes use of the whole body and hands-on experience
Musical	makes use of music, environmental sounds, sets key points in a rhythmic or melodic pattern
Interpersonal/Social	makes use of discussion, cooperative learning, and large group simulation
Intrapersonal/Self	makes use of one's ability for self-reflection, as expressed in journal writing, computer work, brainstorming sessions, and guided imagery tours
Naturalistic	makes use of students' love and understanding of nature
Existential	makes use of students' ability to conceptualize and philosophize deeper questions regarding human existence, as expressed in journal writing, discussion, cooperative learning, and large group simulation

Gardner (2003) explains that multiple intelligence in context can yield true learning. Transforming classroom instruction, through hands-on, all inclusive pedagogy, can only yield positive results even for those students who have been left behind, ignored, or simply labeled learning disabled, including adult learners. The only option for educators is either to nurture and strengthen our students' intelligence or ignore them and allow them to deteriorate. As a result, Gardner (2003) does not ask, "How smart am I?" Rather, he asks, "How am I smart?" As far as he is concerned, there are no more or less intelligent students. There simply are differently abled students based on their primary intelligences. That is to say, all students are intelligent, each in a different way. Absorbing course material can be different and unique for each student based on his/her multiple

intelligences (Gardner, 2003).

### **The Third Step: Content Learning**

Another way to engage adult learners is by incorporating assigned readings topics appropriate to their major fields of study. This works as a motivator on several levels. First of all, it gives them a chance to work from within their areas of interest, which, in itself, gives them an incentive to work harder and get better results. Secondly, working from within their major fields of study allows them to expand their basic knowledge and get a better understanding of current issues in their chosen professions. Furthermore, by allowing them to have a glimpse into their future, they get a better understanding of what their chosen professions entail, and consequently if they have made the right choice in their future occupation. As a matter of fact, incorporating topics and tasks that adult learners have identified as meaningful to them may contribute in transferring the power for growth and development into the learner's hands.

### **The Fourth Step: Peer and Community Tutoring**

Research shows that peer and community tutoring empower students in a way that straight classroom instruction cannot. Community involvement, either in the form of internships or volunteer community service, is increasingly gaining ground and popularity in many colleges and universities. Increasingly, many colleges and universities require some type of service learning as a graduation requirement. Peer and community tutoring can be used to reinforce individual, as well as collective learning, and at the same time fulfill the community service requirement. It appears that even developmental learners have a great deal to gain from peer and/or community tutoring. In many cases, even the most reluctant developmental learners take charge of their learning and practically overnight become better learners.

There is much more to be said about teaching adult learners. Learner-centered instruction is key to developing life long learners. I believe that learner-centered instruction should be used across the board in all educational settings. It is obvious that learner-centered instruction is the key to educating current and future generations. Let us hope that through learner-centered education, we will create not only critical thinkers and good writers, but also model citizens. What needs to be emphasized, then, is not simply changing teaching methods; this is not an exercise in methods. It is about caring for our students as individuals and about our willingness to lend a helping hand, and perhaps be the guiding light in their journey. This is indicative of Parker Palmer's (1998) idea of a good teacher. In fact, in his book *The Courage To Teach*, he eloquently describes the one trait that all "good" teachers share:

Good teaching comes in myriad forms, but good teachers share one trait: they are truly present in the classroom, deeply engaged with

their students and their subject. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts--the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self. (Palmer, 1998)

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